

Message Text

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ACTION COME-00

INFO OCT-01 EA-09 ISO-00 EPA-04 EB-08 OES-06 CIAE-00

INR-07 NSAE-00 CEQ-01 NSF-02 INT-05 SP-02 /045 W

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FM AMEMBASSY TOKYO

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5457

UNCLAS TOKYO 2103

DEPT PASS TO EPA AND DOC

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: EIND, SENV, TECH, JA

SUBJECT: CAUSTIC SODA MANUFACTURING PROCESS

1. TWO RELATED BUT CONTRADICTORY DEVELOPMENTS HAVE EMERGED IN JAPAN'S CAUSTIC SODA INDUSTRY. ONE IS MITT'S MOVE, UNDER INDUSTRY PRESSURE, TO POSTPONE BY TWO OR THREE YEARS DEADLINE ON OVERALL CONVERSION OF CAUSTIC SODA MANUFACTURING PROCESS FROM MERCURY CELLS TO NON-POLLUTING TECHNOLOGY, SCHEDULED FOR END OF MARCH NEXT YEAR. THE OTHER IS ANNOUNCEMENT BY ASAHI CHEMICAL INDUSTRY CO. LTD., FEBRUARY 9 OF SIGNING OF CONTRACT WITH PRINCE ALBERT PULP CO. OF CANADA TO EXPORT ITS ION EXCHANGE MEMBRANE TECHNOLOGY FOR PRODUCTION OF CAUSTIC SODA.

2. MITT'S REASONS FOR POSTPONEMENT ARE TWO-FOLD. ONE IS MANAGERIAL AND THE OTHER IS TECHNOLOGICAL. MITT SAYS THAT SOME CAUSTIC SODA MANUFACTURERS IN JAPAN COULD GO BANKRUPT SHOULD CONVERSION BE CARRIED OUT FORCIBLY UNDER MITT'S ADMINISTRATIVE GUIDANCE. THE TECHNICAL REASON IS THAT THE ION EXCHANGE MEMBRANE PROJECT, CONSIDERED BEST, "HAS NOT UNDERGONE TECHNOLOGICAL EVALUATION", IN MITT'S VIEW.

3. GOJ HAD DECIDED IN JUNE 1973 TO DISCONTINUE CONVENTIONAL CAUSTIC SODA MANUFACTURING PROCESS INVOLVING USE OF MERCURY
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TO PREVENT ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION. ORIGINAL PLAN CALLED FOR TWO-THIRDS OF MERCURY PROCESS PLANTS TO CONVERT TO OTHER PROCESSES BY THE END OF SEPTEMBER 1975 AND ALL OTHERS BY THE END OF MARCH 1978. AS OF THE END OF SEPTEMBER 1976, CONVERSION RATE WAS 61.3 PER CENT.

4. UNDER ASAHI CHEMICAL-PRINCE ALBERT CONTRACT, JAPANESE

FIRM WILL EXPORT NOT ONLY TECHNOLOGY BUT MAIN EQUIPMENT AND ION EXCHANGE MEMBRANES. ASAHI WAS CHOSEN BY THE CANADIAN COMPANY, AFFILIATE OF PARSONS AND WHITTEMORE INC. OF U.S., OVER TWO U.S. FIRMS ALSO EXPLOITING ION EXCHANGE MEMBRANCE PROCESS. INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF ASAHI CHEMICAL TEIHNOLGY MAY ACT TO ACCELERATE RATHER THAN PUT OFF INTRODUCTION AND ADOPTION OF THE ION EXCHANGE MEMBRANCE PROCESS IN JAPAN.

5. COMMENT: MITI IS INVOLVED IN ALL JAPANESE INDUSTRIAL ACTIVITY, INCLUDING EXPORTS OF TECHNOLOGY. THE EVENTS CITED ABOVE SHOULD NOT BE CONSTRUED AS MEANING THAT MITI'S LEFT HAND DOES NOT KNOW WHAT THE RIGHT HAND IS DOING. RATHER, MITI HAS BEEN FORCED TO LISTEN TO THE COMPLAINTS OF SMALL AND INEFFICIENT CAUSTIC SODA MANUFACTURERS, WHO CANNOT AFFORD TO JUNK EXISTING EQUIPMENT AND REPLACE IT WITH WELL-KNOWN DIAPHRAGM PROCESS OR NEW MEMBRANE PROCESS. ASAHI CHEMICAL INDUSTRY AND ASAHI GLASS LAREDAY ARE USING ION EXCHANGE MEMBRANCE PROCESS, WHICH IS PURPORTEDLY SUPERIOR TECHNICALLY AND ECONOMICALLY TO BOTH DIAPHRAGM AND MERCURY PROCESSES. ALL NEW PROCESSES, HOWEVE, MUST BE EMPLOYED ON A LARGE SCALE TO OBTAIN FULL VALUE, AND IT IS HERE THAT THE SMALL MANUFACTUERS LOSE OUT. END COMMENT.
SHOESMITH

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